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EDITORIALS

SHOULD AN ARTIST PLEASE HIMSELF OR THE PUBLIC?

ASK almost any artist nowadays: "Should the artist please himself or the public?" and he is apt to look to see if you are sane, and then, with a shocked air, reply in the words of Wm. H. Vanderbilt "The public be damned!" and then contemptuously add "of course the artist should please only himself. He should never think of the public!" And he will do this utterly unconscious of the corrupting hypocrisy at the base of the reply. Let us examine this point of view:

In a savage state of society there are no professional artists who live off the surplus food procured by the tribe, since food-getting is the tribe's main labor. Every Indian paints his own tent and his wife ornaments her own dress. When the tribe becomes sufficiently civilized to quit nomadic habits and settles down in some place, like the Zuñis, some one more inventive than the others and less of a fighter will make a drinking bowl, let us say, and ornament it—to please himself alone, it is true. The chief warrior, strolling along and seeing it, and being pleased and charmed by it, may covet the bowl and take it; or some one may offer him food in exchange for it—because he has also been pleased by the bowl. This will also bring the artist a certain praise for his cleverness which is always pleasing. Another will offer food for a second bowl, because he also was charmed. Seeing every one pleased and ready to pay him food and even homage, the artist sees ahead of him surcease from the toil of procuring his own food—so long as he pleases the whole tribe—his public.

This looks as if the artist actually had pleased and expressed himself only when he made the first pleasing bowl. In reality he pleased and expressed not only himself but his tribe, at first unknowingly, afterwards knowingly. For had he made a bowl which did not please his tribe from the chief down, he would have been ignored and so compelled to hunt for his own food for lack of patronage from those who gave him food for his bowls—food which they obtained by risking their lives, fighting enemy tribes and hunting and digging. And note well: at any time should he make bowls which no longer pleased his tribe—his public—he would also be forced to procure his own food at the risk of his own life.

Thus it is patent that only by making, at first instinctively and then by design, that which pleased his public, could he ever become a public artist to his tribe and manage to do any quantity of art—even to please himself—and live while doing so. Hence to live at all, labor free, he is forced primarily to please his public, even if in so doing he also pleased himself.

Thus becoming a public artist, he more and more

studies to please his public in order to insure freedom from drudgery and tribal duties, but this relief is guaranteed him only so long as he does please his public. For, according to the nature of things, a still more active Zuñi will see him making bowls and note that they bring him food and even honor, and he will say: "Shucks! I can do better than he!" and he goes to work. To please himself? No, to captivate the public by pleasing it. For one inventor suggests to another man that he may also invent and do even better than the first. Then a rivalry will spring up between the two. To please themselves? Never! But to see who can most surely captivate the public by pleasing it. What is true of the potter is true of the poet, the priest, sculptor, jeweler, etc.

Thus it has always been since before the dawn of history. Homer expressed himself, it is true, but he did more—he expressed the Greek soul. Pheidias expressed the Athenian people, not merely himself. Dante is medieval Italy incarnate. Michelangelo, Raphael and Titian expressed the Renaissance. Shakespeare went farther and expressed not himself alone or the Elizabethan age, but all humanity.

Not one of those great artists gabbled about "expressing themselves" or pleasing themselves—they thought only of one thing: the captivating of their tribe and beyond that the great public.

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Then whence comes this silly assumption on the part of shallow artists that they should ignore the public and please only themselves? The question brings us again back to that date of 1850—the date which marks the cleavage between healthy modern and sickly "modernistic" art, a date most important in the history of the world. For the epoch between 1840 and 1860 witnessed intellectual and moral activities which changed the direction of human thought even more than the French Revolution. It was during this epoch that the teaching of the individualist Jean Jacques Rousseau really came to a full fruition—in the transformation of an admirable because constructive egotism into a repellant, because destructive egomania, with all its disastrous consequences. It was then the pernicious theory of "self-expression" was born and fattened until "individualism" became a disease and was preached in every field, from religion to art and from art to politics. Until, in the church, we had a Talmadge, a Moody and Sankey and a Billy Sunday, who added the brass-band to religion; in politics, we had a Bismarck, a Von Moltke and the Kaiser, who said: "Humanity commences at the Rhine and ends at the Vistula—the rest are mere ants, which I will crush!" and in art we had the modernistic kickers and bawlers

all over Europe who frog-swelled themselves until they dared to say: "The public is a herd of cattle!" "Hurrah for liberty in art!" "We will paint and carve what we like, and any way we like: we will please ourselves, because the ignorant public knows nothing about art!"

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All this swell-headedness, all this egomania in high places, has had its logical and deplorable result in every walk of life, in a pernicious, even diabolical self-assertion and a self-parading that is nauseating enough to force one to ask: "Is the hog in man going to triumph?"

The same wave of egomania has also reached the world of art in this country. We hear on all sides, not a plea for social service in art but a bellowing for "individuality," for the selfish expression of self, instead of a noble expression of what the public thinks and feels and longs to see adequately and profoundly expressed for it, by a competent, modest, unselfish artist, educated at its expense. All is self, self, self!

One of our most distinguished artists, Mr. Carroll Beckwith, in a letter to the *New York Times* of August 5th, says under the heading of "Right Art Training":

"The reading of the prospectus for this coming season of one of our most important art schools, one in which I was myself an instructor during the first fourteen years of its existence, shows me more convincingly the dominant note of 'modernism' which is now pervading, and doing untold injury, to the art training of the youths of America. This note is emphasized, viz.: the fostering of 'individuality.' It is covered in the prospectus by the following sentences: 'Assist the student to cultivate that expression of self, as being the only path leading to great success.'"

"The ultimate end of all study of art must be individuality."

This is nothing but a brazen excitation to egomania; and destructive of all hope of any large results in the creation of really great works by American artists, to the greater glory of our country, and for which we pay heavily in good taxes.

For none of those artists of the past who began and remained entirely great ever thought of their "individuality." They would have scorned to stoop so low. They thought only of perfection, of greatness, of lifting their fellowmen and mankind up, up to the sublimely beautiful, and left their "individuality" to take care of itself. The result was they became so great that their individuality was assured for all time.

We can rest assured that Dante, Giotto and Ghiberti, Shakespeare, Velasquez and Rembrandt never gave their individuality one moment's worry. They forgot themselves absolutely in their effort at trying to serve and express their epoch. And this service brought them so shining an individuality that it still radiates with increasing splendor all over the earth.

The "modernistic" individualists are so much more concerned about their ridiculous "individuality" than they are about the grandeur and beauty of the work which they are going to finish—and sign also, you can rest assured—they are so mortally

afraid their work might resemble that of some one of the thousands of artists of the past, that they exemplify what Voltaire said: "Many artists, fearing to be imitators seek sidepaths, and so stray away from the beautiful nature which their predecessors have followed." And they stray away until they fall into and flounder about in the quagmire of the weird, the corrupt and the satanically ugly.

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How blinding egomania is, when it becomes a disease, is proven by the fact that when these swelled-up modernists lampoon "the public" they mix things up—they do not mean the public, they mean "the crowd." That is to say they mean that portion of men which is too enslaved by toil or too tired and bored to think, and who rush to exhibitions and art museums not to enjoy but to relieve themselves of their boredom, such as one sees at the Salon of the Independents at Paris and here, and who go in shoals, filled with gaping curiosity, like Swiss goats who climb the mountain-tops just to see what is there. These crowds go to snicker and twist themselves with laughter, or they go to the Louvre museum because it is the thing to do. But these thoughtless crowds do not constitute "the public" we mean. They are a part of the public, it is true, but only a part. The public means everybody in the world, not only of to-day but of to-morrow, and for centuries to come. That public includes the greatest as well as the humblest, and contains all the brains there are on earth, including those of the "modernistic" artists.

Moreover, these same modernists who so glibly insult the public—when in their hearts they mean the "crowd"—are really insanely eager for universal and undying public approval. And they also hope to attain it. How? By painting, carving, talking and rhyming for "a certain few," a few "Mandarins in Art" living in their Ivory Towers upon whom they depend to have their praises sung across an ever-spreading acreage, like a boy who throws a stone in a mill-pond just to watch the wavelets ripple in ever-widening circles. And therein shines out their hypocrisy. For, denying that they work for fame or for public approval, they yet are consumed with a hunger for it, so fierce that they must seek it. Only, they insist on obtaining it in a peculiar way, in an ever more ego-vulgar manner, thus confessing that, in the last analysis, they hope that their works will please not only their small petty public of twelve—for whom alone neurotic Flaubert said he wrote—but that the great world-public will also finally be pleased. And George Sand brought him to book by saying "The whole world is the fatherland of the artist!"

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An artist only honors himself when he never loses for one moment the thought of pleasing that great world-public. He should seek forever to captivate it, not merely by pleasing it, but by pleasing it so much that it will be delighted to take off its hat to him, thank the giver of all good things for having created him, and honor itself by nailing his name high up in the temple of fame. Thus he will win a niche in the heart of mankind, which

means the immortal love of the race. By pleasing this world-public, the artist serves not only that public but himself and all his progeny. For if there is one thing which, deep down in our soul, is to us the most precious of things, it is the knowledge that we have securely won not merely the envy of our fellow artists, but the love of our fellowmen.

The truly wise and great artist digs down deep into the heart and soul of man, there to sense if he can what the race is feeling, thinking and longing to have expressed for itself—in the hope of being enraptured by the nobility of the forms in which the artist expresses the things which he finds there. And the artist is also full of high emotion when he is privileged to fully sense some sublime, some ennobling human trait or lofty aspiration, and enabled to express what he has discovered in forms so beautiful that the contemplation of them will bring ecstasy to the soul and palpitation to the heart of his neighbor, if only during his own epoch. These are the heroes of art to whom we bring tears of delight and wreaths of laurel.

What America needs now is more truly great art. Merely clever, trivial, even degenerate art will always be produced a plenty, most of it by persons who would be better employed in hoeing corn. But what the artists of America must create, in order to justify themselves before the people, is more sublime works of art—not greatly individual, but individually great—in order to raise the prestige and power of the nation.

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Of course an artist should express himself. For "All Nature is bent upon expression!" Emerson finely said. But the question is always "What shall he express—himself or the public?" Reflection will prove that he gains salvation only by expressing himself—while in the act of expressing the public to itself in terms that will exalt the public. The Creator himself did that. "He hath made all things beautiful in his time!" said Solomon. Why? To charm all his creatures to love Him!

An artist should be individual also. But why worry about that? If he is sincere and never imitates any one—which early in life he is warned not to do because "imitation is suicide"—he will certainly be individual. As Goethe truly said: "The artist, make what contortions soever he will, can bring forth only his own individuality."

The trouble is, the modernistic individualist by profession is not content with a modest, refined individuality. His legitimate egotism having degenerated into egomania, he froths in his soul for a peculiar, brass-band, loudly self-advertising kind of "individuality" smacking more or less of charlatanism, an individuality of which vulgar self-parading is the main ingredient.

Are we opposed to an artist pleasing himself? On the contrary, we agree entirely with that clever and sound painter Alfred Stevens when he says, in Maxim LXVI

Before thinking of pleasing the public, one should be satisfied with himself.

That is, satisfied that one has learned the trade side of one's art—of painting, carving, dramatizing, etc.; when one has satisfied oneself that one has

become, not the greatest craftsman in the world, but a first-class craftsman, but then—one should think first of all of pleasing the public.

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And how long will our poor "modernists," like bored children who have been lead astray by an evil *ignis fatuus*, continue to believe that the public knows nothing about art, when in reality it is not only the best but the final judge, from whose verdict there is no appeal?

In a very illuminating article on "Southey" in the *Yale Review* of January 1915, the late T. R. Lounsbury, that delightful sage, after showing that Southey had been highly praised as a poet by a few professional critics and political mandarins and for special reasons, said: "Against this laudatory estimate of professional critics—and to some extent of authors of high repute—stood then and has always continued to stand, unshaken, the indifference of the general public of cultivated men. They could not be induced to read, or if induced they could not be made to admire. This attitude towards Southey is another proof among the many proofs familiar to the student of Literary History of the truth of the dictum, when properly understood, of the great Greek philosopher, that the people at large, however contemptible they may appear when taken one by one, are not, when collectively considered, unworthy of sovereignty."

"The principle" said Aristotle "that the Multitude ought to be supreme rather than the few best, is capable of a satisfactory explanation. Each individual among the many has a share of virtue and judgment, and when they meet together they become in a manner one man. . . . Hence, the many are better judges than a single man, of music and poetry; for some understand one part and some another, and among them they understand the whole."

In the face of this sound dictum, how stupid it is for an artist to aim to win the verdict of only a few! Let it be remembered that the opinions of even the greatest critics should not be accepted until verified, because even these disagree. For example: the three profoundest critics of the nineteenth century were Scherer, Saint-Beuve and Taine. Of these Saint-Beuve was perhaps the most brilliant and Taine the most sound. If any two critics ought to have agreed, it is these two. But it was not so. Brunetière, in "The Evolution of Lyric Poetry in France," [Vol. 1, Page 13] quotes Taine as having said, apropos of the recurrence of different characters in different works of Balzac:

"That which truly completes in him, Balzac, the philosopher, and puts him on a level with the greatest artists, is the reunion of all his works in one single work. Each romance is related to all the others; the same persons reappear; everything dovetails; at each page we embrace the whole 'human comedy,' it is a landscape arranged so as to be seen at each turn. Never did an artist concentrate so much light on the faces he wishes to paint; never did an artist better guard against the original imperfections of his art; for the isolated drama, or the isolated romance, comprising but an isolated story, does not well express nature. It cuts off only one single event from the vast tissue of things, and suppresses thus the attachments and prolongations by which that event is continued into its neighboring events; because he chooses and mutilates and he alters his model in reducing it. To be exact, therefore, is to be great. Balzac sees a truth because he sees ensembles. His systematic power has given to his pictures unity with force, and interest with fidelity."

Now compare with the above the following by Saint-Beuve:

"This pretension (of Balzac) to seize ensembles, conducted him finally to one of the falsest ideas, according to me, the most contrary to the interest of a work of art, I mean, to make reappear in one romance and then in another the same personages, like a stage supernumerary already seen. Nothing is more destructive of curiosity which is born of the new and that charm of the unexpected which makes the attraction of a romance. One finds oneself at every corner of the field in front of the same faces."

Here we find two of the greatest art critics of all time differing on the very foundation of Balzac's whole æsthetic theory, and himself one of the giants of literature! If these two renowned French critics, living in an epoch and place in which men aimed to lift Art Criticism to a Science, could yet so differ, is it not evident that, until lately, most of the art criticism, at least in newspapers, has been entirely empirical and mere personal opinion, above all when not supported by the opinion of the majority of thinkers of the past? Moreover one man's opinion may be affected by dishonesty or dominated by prejudice; or, if sincere, may be revised later or changed entirely under the pressure of new facts or clever reasoning; or the critic may lose his power of being moved by that which once stirred him profoundly, as was the case with Darwin, to whom, in middle age, music and poetry became meaningless if not distasteful, as he himself laments in his autobiography. Therefore what is the opinion of any *single* man or of a few men worth—unless supported by the verdicts of the greatest thinkers and the public of the world?

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Let not those who are anxious to find the true point of view from which art should be judged feel disheartened by this difference of opinion between two great critics—on one question only. For they did agree on most of the points and principally on this: that Balzac was a giant of literature; moreover they agreed nearly entirely as to which of the works is his masterpiece. Therefore they agreed upon essentials and they also agreed with the majority. They disagreed only with regard to a part of Balzac's æsthetic theory. And this should encourage our readers to think that the final verdict of the public is always sound.

But by the public we do not mean the "crowd." Heaven forbid! We mean the sane, normal, cultured world-public. That is to say, when the majority of the cultured public votes that a work of art is great—during the ten years after its appearance—that work of art is great for that epoch, and in France it is worthy of being put in the Luxembourg. If now in the succeeding epoch of ten years the cultured public also votes it great, it is a still greater work, and worthy of being placed in the Louvre after the artist's death, as is the custom of the French government. If then, for twenty or thirty epochs of ten years each, the cultured public cumulatively votes across two or three

centuries that that work is great—to deny it is to be more or less insane or a Mephistophelian.

Every man should hate waste and seek to prevent it by keeping himself out of the class of wasted men. An artist who selfishly thinks only of his self-amusement and of the pleasing of himself alone in his art creations is nothing but a parasite. For if his work is so ugly, so individual, so cryptic, so excessively "modernistic" in any direction that the public simply can not understand it, he is a mere waster of the substance created by others with the sweat of their backs, a mere loafer, wasting his time, the time of his neighbors whom he calls to see or buy his works, and a waster of good material which another unselfish artist might use in pleasing the public. Besides, he dishonestly consumes the food he did not earn. For no man who does not add to the sum of public good, in some way, has a right to eat any food he did not procure with his own hands. If he allows the public to feed him from its surplus, he should in return try to pay his debts by aiming at least to exalt that public by his work and lift it so far above the commonplace that his work will become a national asset, because he gave it an increasingly fructifying spiritual charm. Even if he should fail, he will encourage other artists and repay those who supported him by the simple fact that he hitched his wagon to a star!

None can be more anxious than we to see enlarged the crop of truly individual and great men. But we maintain that the more a man chases after "individuality" instead of forgetting it in the patient pursuit of the beautiful and perfect in his work, the more certainly will he lose it—by straying off into blind alleys and becoming at last a lost adventurer. But the more he forgets it and serves and trusts the world-public, the more certainly will he find it and become a conquering artist.

If this holds with force in regard to the private work of an artist, it holds absolutely in regard to public monumental work, whether placed in a square, in a church or in a great civic building. In a public monument an artist should never think of expressing only himself. He should first of all think of expressing the public to the public in forms that the cultured majority will feel are splendid forms and find joy in their contemplation. To think and act otherwise, and force upon the public forms of ugliness and such as it can not understand, is impertinent egomania on the part of the artist, and his work should be removed instantaneously, and the work done over by another more modest artist, willing to talk to his fellowmen in a language they can understand and which will charm instead of revolting them.

Far be it from us to decry egotism. On the contrary—ill fares the tribe in which a public-spirited sane egotism does not exist. It will have no history. And blessed will be the age in which every living man will be egotistical enough to strive to conquer—not the brain but the heart of his fellowman. Milton will then see his Paradise regained on this earth!